

# The Land of Painted Caves

*Also by Jean M. Auel*

The Clan of the Cave Bear

The Valley of Horses

The Mammoth Hunters

The Plains of Passage

The Shelters of Stone

Earth's Children®: Book 6

The Land of  
Painted Caves

A Novel

JEAN M. AUDEL

  
HODDER &  
STOUGHTON

First published in Great Britain in 2011 by Hodder & Stoughton  
An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978-0-340-82425-2  
Trade paperback ISBN 978-0-340-82426-9

Typeset in Adobe Garamond by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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London NW1 3BH

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DEDICATION

For RAEANN  
First born, last cited, always loved,  
and for FRANK,  
who stands by her side,  
and for AMELIA and BRET, ALECIA, and EMORY,  
fine young adults,  
with love



# Acknowledgments

I am grateful for the assistance of many people who have helped me to write the *Earth's Children*® series. I want to thank again two French archaeologists who have been particularly helpful over the years, Dr. Jean-Philippe Rigaud and Dr. Jean Clottes. They have both enabled me to understand the background and to visualise the prehistoric setting of these books.

Dr. Rigaud's help has been invaluable beginning with my first research visit to France, and his assistance has continued over the years. I particularly enjoyed the visit, which he arranged, to a stone shelter in Gorge d'Enfer, which is still much the way it was in the Ice Age: a deep protected space, open in the front, with a level floor, a rock ceiling and a natural spring at the back. It was easy to see how it could be made into a comfortable place to live. And I appreciated his willingness to explain to reporters and other media people from many countries the interesting and important information about some of the prehistoric sites in and around Les Eyzies de Tayac when Book 5, *The Shelters of Stone*, was launched internationally from that location in France.

I am also most grateful to Dr. Jean Clottes, who arranged for Ray and me to visit many remarkable painted caves in the south of France. Particularly memorable was the visit to the caves on the property of Comte Robert Begouën in the Volp Valley – l'Enlene, Trois-Frères, and Tuc-d'Audoubert – whose art is often pictured in texts and art books. To actually see some of that remarkable art in its environment, escorted by both Dr. Clottes and Count Begouën, was a treasured experience, and for that thanks in great measure are also due to Robert Begouën. It was his grandfather and two brothers who first explored the caves and began the practice of maintaining them, which continues to this day. No one visits the caves without the permission of Count Begouën, and usually his accompaniment.

We visited many more caves with Dr. Clottes, including Gargas, which is one of my favourites. With its many handprints, including those of a child, and the niche, large enough for an adult to enter, whose inner rock walls are completely covered with a rich red paint using the ochres from the region, I am convinced Gargas is a woman's cave. It feels like the womb of the earth. Above all, I am grateful to Jean Clottes for the visit to the extraordinary Grotte

Chauvet. Even though he became too ill with the flu to accompany us, Dr. Clottes arranged for Jean-Marie Chauvet, the man who discovered it and for whom it was named, and Dominique Baffier, curator of Grotte Chauvet, to show us that remarkable site. A young man who was working at the site was also with us and helped me through some of the more difficult parts.

It was a deeply moving experience that I will never forget and I am grateful to both M. Chauvet and Dr. Baffier for their clear and astute explanations. We went in through the ceiling, much enlarged since M. Chauvet and his colleagues first found their way in, and down a ladder that was attached to the rock wall – the original entrance was closed by a landslide many thousands of years ago. They explained some of the changes that have occurred during the past 35,000 years since the first artists made their magnificent paintings.

In addition, I would like to thank Nicholas Conard, an American who lives in Germany and is in charge of the Archaeology Department at the University in Tübingen, for the opportunity to visit several of the Caves along the Danube in that region of Germany. He also showed us several of the ancient carved ivory artifacts that are more than thirty thousand years old, including mammoths, a graceful flying bird that he found in two parts several years apart, and a most amazing lion–human figure. His latest find is a female figure that was created in the same style as others from France, Spain, Austria, Germany, the Czech Republic from the same era, but that is unique in its execution.

I also want to thank Dr. Lawrence Guy Strauss, who has been so willing and helpful in arranging for visits to sites and caves and often accompanying us on several trips to Europe. There were many highlights during those trips, but one of the most interesting was the visit to Abrigo do Lagar Velho, Portugal, the site of the ‘lapedo valley child’, whose skeleton showed evidence that contact between Neanderthals and anatomically modern humans resulted in interbreeding. The discussions with Dr. Strauss about those Ice Age humans were not only informative, but always fascinating.

I have had discussions and asked questions of many other archaeologists, palaeanthropologists and specialists that I have met, about that particular time in our prehistory, when for many thousands of years both kinds of humans occupied Europe at the same time. I have appreciated their willingness to answer questions and discuss the several possibilities of how they lived.

I want to give special thanks to the French Ministry of Culture for the publication of a book, which I found invaluable: *L'Art des Cavernes: Atlas des Grottes Ornées Paléolithiques Françaises*, Paris, 1984, Ministère de la Culture. It contains very complete descriptions, including the floor plans, photographs, and drawings, as well as an explanatory narrative of most of the known painted and engraved caves in France, as of 1984. It does not include Cosquer, whose



entrance is below the surface of the Mediterranean, or Chauvet, neither of which were discovered until after 1990.

I have visited many caves, so many times, and I can remember the ambience, the mood, the feeling of seeing exceptional art painted on the walls inside caves, but I couldn't recall precisely what the first figure was, or on which wall it appeared, how far into the cave it was, or what direction it was facing. This book gave me the answers. The only problem was that it was published in French, of course, and while I have learned some French over the years, my command of the language is far from adequate.

So I am deeply indebted to my friend, Claudine Fisher, Honorary French Consul for Oregon, French Professor and Director of Canadian Studies at Portland State University. She is a native speaker who was born in France and she translated all the information I needed of every cave I wanted. It was a lot of work, but without her help, I could not have written this book, and I am more grateful than I can begin to express. She has been helpful in many other ways, too, besides just being a good friend.

There are several other friends I'd like to thank for their willingness to read a long and not-quite-polished manuscript, and make comments as readers: Karen Auel-Feuer, Kendall Auel, Cathy Humble, Deanna Sterett, Gin DeCamp, Claudine Fisher, and Ray Auel.

I want to offer gratitude *in memoriam*, to Dr. Jan Jelinek, who was an archaeologist from Czechoslovakia, now known as Czech Republic, who helped me in many ways. From the beginning when we first exchanged letters, and then visits that Ray and I made to see the palaeolithic sites near Brno, and then his and his wife's (Kveta) trip to Oregon. His help was invaluable. He was always kind, and generous with his time and knowledge, and I miss him.

I am lucky to have Betty Prashker as my editor. Her comments are always insightful, and she takes my best efforts and makes them better. Thank you.

Gratitude always to the one who has been there from the beginning, my wonderful literary agent, Jean Naggar. With every book, I appreciate her more. I also want to thank Jennifer Weltz, Jean's partner at the Jean V. Naggar Literary Agency. They continue to perform miracles with this series, which is translated into many foreign languages and available all over the world.

For the past nineteen years Delores Rooney Pander has been my secretary and personal assistant. Unfortunately, she has become ill and has retired, but I want to thank her for her many years of service. You don't really know how much you count on someone like that until she is gone. I miss more than the work she did for me, I miss our conversations and discussions. Over the years she became a good friend.

And most of all, for Ray, my husband, who is always there for me. Love and gratitude beyond measure.



# I

The band of travellers walked along the path between the clear sparkling water of Grass River and the black-streaked white limestone cliff, following the trail that paralleled the right bank. They went single file around the bend where the stone wall jutted out closer to the water's edge. Ahead a smaller path split off at an angle toward the crossing place, where the flowing water spread out and became shallower, bubbling around exposed rocks.

Before they reached the fork in the trail, a young woman near the front suddenly stopped, her eyes opening wide as she stood perfectly still, staring ahead. She pointed with her chin, not wanting to move. 'Look! Over there!' she said in a hissing whisper of fear. 'Lions!'

Joharran, the leader, lifted his arm, signalling the band to a halt. Just beyond the place where the trail diverged, they now saw pale-tawny cave lions moving around in the grass. The grass was such effective camouflage, however, that they might not have noticed them until they were much closer, if it hadn't been for the sharp eyes of Thefona. The young woman from the Third Cave had exceptionally good vision, and though she was quite young, she was noted for her ability to see far and well. Her innate talent had been recognised early and they had begun training her when she was a small girl; she was their best lookout.

Near the back of the group, walking in front of three horses, Ayla and Jondalar looked up to see what was causing the delay. 'I wonder why we've stopped,' Jondalar said, a familiar frown of worry wrinkling his forehead.

Ayla observed the leader and the people around him closely, and instinctively moved her hand to shield the warm bundle that she carried in the soft leather blanket tied to her chest. Jonayla had recently nursed and was sleeping, but moved slightly at her mother's touch. Ayla had an uncanny ability to interpret meaning from body language, learned young when she lived with the Clan. She knew Joharran was alarmed and Thefona was frightened.

Ayla, too, had extraordinarily sharp vision. She could also pick up sounds above the range of normal hearing and feel the deep tones of those that were below. Her sense of smell and taste were also keen, but she had never compared

herself with anyone, and didn't realise how extraordinary her perceptions were. She was born with heightened acuity in all her senses, which no doubt contributed to her survival after losing her parents and everything she knew at five years. Her only training had come from herself. She had developed her natural abilities during the years she studied animals, chiefly carnivores, when she was teaching herself to hunt.

In the stillness, she discerned the faint but familiar rumblings of lions, detected their distinctive scent on a slight breeze, and noticed that several people in front of the group were gazing ahead. When she looked, she saw something move. Suddenly the cats hidden by the grass seemed to jump into clear focus. She could make out two young and three or four adult cave lions. As she started moving forward, she reached with one hand for her spear-thrower, fastened to a carrying loop on her belt, and with the other for a spear from the holder hanging on her back.

'Where are you going?' Jondalar asked.

She stopped. 'There are lions up ahead just beyond the split in the trail,' she said under her breath.

Jondalar turned to look, and noticed movement that he interpreted as lions now that he knew what to look for. He reached for his weapons as well. 'You should stay here with Jonayla. I'll go.'

Ayla glanced down at her sleeping baby, then looked up at him. 'You're good with the spear-thrower, Jondalar, but there are at least two cubs and three grown lions, probably more. If the lions think the cubs are in danger and decide to attack, you'll need help, someone to back you up, and you know I'm better than anyone, except you.'

His brow furrowed again as he paused to think, looking at her. Then he nodded. 'All right . . . but stay behind me.' He detected movement out of the corner of his eye and glanced back. 'What about the horses?'

'They know lions are near. Look at them,' Ayla said.

Jondalar looked. All three horses, including the new young filly, were staring ahead, obviously aware of the huge felines. Jondalar frowned again. 'Will they be all right? Especially little Grey?'

'They know to stay out of the way of those lions, but I don't see Wolf,' Ayla said. 'I'd better whistle for him.'

'You don't have to,' Jondalar said, pointing in a different direction. 'He must sense something, too. Look at him coming.'

Ayla turned and saw a wolf racing toward her. The canine was a magnificent animal, larger than most, but an injury from a fight with other wolves that left him with a bent ear gave him a rakish look. She made the special signal that she used when they hunted together. He knew it meant to stay near

and pay close attention to her. They ducked around people as they hurried toward the front, trying not to cause any undue commotion, and to remain as inconspicuous as possible.

'I'm glad you're here,' Joharran said softly when he saw his brother and Ayla with the wolf quietly appear with their spear-throwers in hand.

'Do you know how many there are?' Ayla asked.

'More than I thought,' Thefona said, trying to seem calm and not let her fear show. 'When I first saw them, I thought there were maybe three or four, but they are moving around in the grass, and now I think there may be ten or more. It's a big pride.'

'And they are feeling confident,' Joharran said.

'How do you know that?' Thefona asked.

'They're ignoring us.'

Jondalar knew his mate was very familiar with the huge felines. 'Ayla knows cave lions,' he said, 'perhaps we should ask her what she thinks.' Joharran nodded in her direction, asking the question silently.

'Joharran is right. They know we're here. And they know how many they are and how many we are,' Ayla said, then added, 'They may see us as something like a herd of horses or aurochs and think they may be able to single out a weak one. I think they are new to this region.'

'What makes you think so?' Joharran said. He was always surprised at Ayla's wealth of knowledge of four-legged hunters, but for some reason it was also at times like this that he noticed her unusual accent more.

'They don't know us, that's why they're so confident,' Ayla continued. 'If they were a resident pride that lived around people and had been chased or hunted a few times, I don't think they would be so unconcerned.'

'Well, maybe we should give them something to be concerned about,' Jondalar said.

Joharran's brow wrinkled in a way that was so much like his taller though younger brother's, it made Ayla want to smile, but it usually showed at a time when smiling would be inappropriate. 'Perhaps it would be wiser just to avoid them,' the dark-haired leader said.

'I don't think so,' Ayla said, bowing her head and looking down. It was still difficult for her to disagree with a man in public, especially a leader. Though she knew it was perfectly acceptable among the Zelandonii – after all, some leaders were women, including, at one time, Joharran's and Jondalar's mother – such behaviour from a woman would not have been tolerated in the Clan, the ones who raised her.

'Why not?' Joharran asked, his frown turning into a scowl.

'Those lions are resting too close to the home of the Third Cave,' Ayla said

quietly. 'There will always be lions around, but if they are comfortable here, they might think of it as a place to return when they want to rest, and would see any people who come near as prey, especially children or elders. They could be a danger to the people who live at Two Rivers Rock, and the other nearby Caves, including the Ninth.'

Joharran took a deep breath, then looked at his fair-haired brother. 'Your mate is right, and you as well, Jondalar. Perhaps now is the time to let those lions know they are not welcome to settle down so close to our homes.'

'This would be a good time to use spear-throwers so we can hunt from a safer distance. Several hunters here have been practising,' Jondalar said. It was for just this sort of thing that he had wanted to come home and show everyone the weapon he had developed. 'We may not even have to kill one, just injure a couple to teach them to stay away.'

'Jondalar,' Ayla said, softly. Now she was getting ready to differ with him, or at least to make a point that he should consider. She looked down again, then raised her eyes and looked directly at him. She wasn't afraid to speak her mind to him, but she wanted to be respectful. 'It's true that a spear-thrower is a very good weapon. With it, a spear can be thrown from a much greater distance than one thrown by hand, and that makes it safer. But safer is not safe. A wounded animal is unpredictable. And one with the strength and speed of a cave lion, hurt and wild with pain, could do anything. If you decide to use these weapons against those lions, they should not be used to injure, but to kill.'

'She's right, Jondalar,' Joharran said.

Jondalar frowned at his brother, then grinned sheepishly. 'Yes she is, but, as dangerous as they are, I always hate to kill a cave lion if I don't have to. They are so beautiful, so lithe and graceful in the way they move. Cave lions don't have much to be afraid of. Their strength gives them confidence.' He glanced at Ayla with a glint of pride and love. 'I always thought Ayla's Cave Lion totem was right for her.' Discomfited by showing his strong inner feelings for her, a hint of a flush coloured his cheeks. 'But I do think this is a time when spear-throwers could be very useful.'

Joharran noticed that most of the travellers had crowded closer. 'How many are with us that can use one?' he asked his brother.

'Well, there's you, and me, and Ayla, of course,' Jondalar said, looking at the group. 'Rushemar has been practising a lot and is getting pretty good. Solaban's been busy making some ivory handles for tools for some of us and hasn't been working at it as much, but he's got the basics.'

'I've tried a spear-thrower a few times, Joharran. I don't have one of my own, and I'm not very good at it,' Thefona said, 'but I can throw a spear without one.'

'Thank you, Thefona, for reminding me,' Joharran said. 'Nearly everyone

can handle a spear without a spear-thrower, including women. We shouldn't forget that.' Then he directed his comments to the group at large. 'We need to let those lions know that this is not a good place for them. Whoever wants to go after them, using a spear by hand or with the thrower, come over here.'

Ayla started to loosen her baby's carrying blanket. 'Folara, would you watch Jonayla for me?' she said, approaching Jondalar's younger sister, 'unless you'd rather stay and hunt cave lions.'

'I've gone out on drives, but I never was very good with a spear, and I don't seem to be much better with the thrower,' Folara said. 'I'll take Jonayla.' The infant was now thoroughly awake, and when the young woman held out her arms for the baby, she willingly went to her aunt.

'I'll help her,' Proleva said to Ayla. Joharran's mate also had a baby girl in a carrying blanket, just a few days older than Jonayla, and an active boy who could count six years to watch out for as well. 'I think we should take all the children away from here, perhaps back behind the jutting rock, or up to the Third Cave.'

'That's a very good idea,' Joharran said, 'hunters stay here. The rest of you go back, but go slowly. No sudden moves. We want those cave lions to think we are just milling around, like a herd of aurochs. And let's keep together. They will probably go after anyone alone.'

Ayla turned back toward the four-legged hunters and saw many lion faces looking in their direction, very alert. She watched the animals move around, and began to see some distinguishing characteristics, helping her to count them. She watched a big female casually turn around – no, a male, she realised when she saw his male parts from the backside. She'd forgotten for a moment that the males here didn't have manes. The male cave lions near her valley to the east, including one that she knew quite well, did have some hair around the head and neck, but it was sparse. This is a big pride, she thought, more than two handfuls of counting words, possibly as many as three, including the young ones.

While she watched, the big lion took a few more steps into the field, then disappeared into the grass. It was surprising how well the tall thin stalks could hide animals that were so huge.

Though the bones and teeth of cave lions – felines that liked to den in caves, which preserved the bones they left behind – were the same shape as their descendants that would someday roam the distant lands of the continent far to the south, they were more than half again, some nearly twice, as large. In winter they grew a thick winter fur that was so pale, it was almost white, practical concealment in snow for predators who hunted all year long. Their summer coat, though still pale, was more tawny, and some of the cats were still shedding, giving them a rather tattered, mottled look.

Ayla watched the group of mostly women and children break off from the hunters and head back to the cliff they had passed, along with a few young men and women with spears held in readiness whom Joharran had assigned to guard them. Then she noticed that the horses seemed particularly nervous, and thought she should try to calm them. She signalled Wolf to come with her as she walked toward the horses.

Whinney seemed glad to see both her and Wolf when they approached. The horse had no fear of the big canine predator. She had watched Wolf grow up from a tiny little ball of fuzzy fur, had helped to raise him. Ayla had a concern, though. She wanted the horses to go back behind the stone wall with the women and children. She could give Whinney many commands with words and signals, but she wasn't sure how to tell the mare to go with the others and not follow her.

Racer whinnied when she neared; he seemed especially agitated. She greeted the brown stallion affectionately and patted and scratched the young grey filly; then she hugged the sturdy neck of the dun-yellow mare that had been her only friend during the first lonely years after she left the Clan.

Whinney leaned against the young woman with her head over Ayla's shoulder in a familiar position of mutual support. She talked to the mare with a combination of Clan hand signs and words, and animal sounds that she imitated – the special language she had developed with Whinney when she was a foal, before Jondalar taught her to speak his language. Ayla told the mare to go with Folara and Proleva. Whether the horse understood, or just knew that it would be safer for her and her foal, Ayla was glad to see her retreat to the cliff with the other mothers when she pointed her in that direction.

But Racer was nervous and edgy, more so after the mare started walking away. Even grown, the young stallion was accustomed to following his dam, especially when Ayla and Jondalar were riding together, but this time he did not immediately go with her. He pranced and tossed his head and neighed. Jondalar heard him, looked over at the stallion and the woman, then joined them. The young horse nickered at the man as he approached. With two females in his small 'herd', Jondalar wondered if Racer's protective stallion instincts were beginning to make themselves felt. The man talked to him, stroked and scratched his favourite places to settle him, then told him to go with Whinney and slapped him on the rump. It was enough to get him started in the right direction.

Ayla and Jondalar walked back to the hunters. Joharran and his two closest friends and advisers, Solaban and Rushemar, were standing together in the middle of the group that was left. It seemed much smaller now.

'We've been discussing the best way to hunt them,' Joharran said when the couple returned. 'I'm not sure what strategy to use. Should we try to surround them? Or drive them in a certain direction? I will tell you, I know how to hunt



for meat: deer, or bison or aurochs, even mammoth. I've killed a lion or two that were too close to a camp, with the help of other hunters, but lions are not animals I usually hunt, especially not a whole pride.'

'Since Ayla knows lions,' Thefona said, 'let's ask her.'

Everyone turned to look at Ayla. Most of them had heard about the injured lion cub she had taken in and raised until he was full grown. When Jondalar told them the lion did what she told him the way the wolf did, they believed it.

'What do you think, Ayla?' Joharran asked.

'Do you see how the lions are watching us? It's the same way we're looking at them. They think of themselves as the hunters. It might surprise them to be prey for a change,' Ayla said, then paused. 'I think we should stay together in a group and walk toward them, shouting and talking loudly perhaps, and see if they back off. But keep our spears ready, in case one or more come after us before we decide to go after them.'

'Just approach them head-on?' Rushemar asked, with a frown.

'It might work,' Solaban said. 'And if we stay together, we can watch out for each other.'

'It seems like a good plan, Joharran,' Jondalar said.

'I suppose it's as good as any, and I like the idea of staying together and watching out for each other,' the leader said.

'I'll go first,' Jondalar said. He held up his spear, already on his spear-thrower ready to launch. 'I can get a spear off fast with this.'

'I'm sure you can, but let's wait until we get closer so we can all feel comfortable with our aim,' Joharran said.

'Of course,' Jondalar said, 'and Ayla is going to be a backup for me in case something unexpected happens.'

'That's good,' Joharran said. 'We all need a partner, someone to be a backup for the ones who throw first, in case they miss and those lions come at us instead of running away. The partners can decide who will cast first, but it will cause less confusion if everyone waits for a signal before anyone throws.'

'What kind of signal?' Rushemar asked.

Joharran paused, then said, 'Watch Jondalar. Wait until he throws. That can be our signal.'

'I'll be your partner, Joharran,' Rushemar volunteered.

The leader nodded.

'I need a backup,' Morizan said. He was the son of Manvelar's mate, Ayla recalled. 'I'm not sure how good I am, but I have been working at it.'

'I can be your partner. I've been practising with the spear-thrower.'

Ayla turned at the sound of the feminine voice and saw that it was Folara's red-haired friend, Galeya, who had spoken.

Jondalar turned to look, too. That's one way to get close to the son of a leader's mate, he thought, and glanced at Ayla, wondering if she had caught the implication.

'I can partner with Thefona, if she would like,' Solaban said, 'since I'll be using a spear like her, not a spear-thrower.'

The young woman smiled at him, glad to have a more mature and experienced hunter close by.

'I've been practising with a spear-thrower,' Palidar said. He was a friend of Tivonan, the apprentice of Willamar, the Trade Master.

'We can be partners, Palidar,' Tivonan said, 'but I can only use a spear.'

'I haven't really practised much with that thrower either,' Palidar said.

Ayla smiled at the young men. As Willamar's apprentice trader, Tivonan would no doubt become the Ninth Cave's next Trade Master. His friend, Palidar, had come back with Tivonan when he went to visit his Cave on a short trading mission, and Palidar was the one who had found the place where Wolf had got into the terrible fight with the other wolves, and took her to it. She thought of him as a good friend.

'I haven't done much with that thrower, but I can handle a spear.'

It's Mejera, the acolyte of Zelandoni of the Third, Ayla said to herself, remembering that the young woman was with them the first time Ayla went into the Deep of Fountain Rocks to look for the life force of Jondalar's younger brother when they tried to help his elan find its way to the spirit world.

'Everyone has already picked a partner, so I guess we're left. Not only have I not practised with the spear-thrower, I have hardly ever seen it used,' said Jalodan, Morizan's cousin, the son of Manvelar's sister, who was visiting the Third Cave. He was planning to travel with them to the Summer Meeting to meet up with his Cave.

That was it. The twelve men and women who were going to hunt a similar number of lions – animals with greater speed, strength, and ferocity that lived by hunting weaker prey. Ayla began having feelings of doubt and a shiver of fear gave her a chill. She rubbed her arms and felt an eruption of bumps. How could twelve frail humans even think of attacking a pride of lions? She caught sight of the other carnivore, the one she knew, and signalled the animal to stay with her, thinking, twelve people – and Wolf.

'All right, let's go,' Joharran said, 'but keep together.'

The twelve hunters from the Third Cave and the Ninth Cave of the Zelandonii started out together walking directly toward the pride of massive felines. They were armed with spears, tipped with sharpened flint, or bone or ivory sanded to a smooth, round sharp point. Some had spear-throwers that could propel a spear much farther and with more power and speed than one

thrown by hand, but lions had been killed with just spears before. This might be a test of Jondalar's weapon, but it would test the courage of the ones who were hunting even more.

'Go away!' Ayla shouted as they started out. 'We don't want you here!'

Several others picked up the refrain, with variations, shouting and yelling at the animals as they approached, telling them to go away.

At first the cats, young and old, just watched them come. Then some began to move around, back into the grass that hid them so well, and out again, as though they weren't sure what to do. The ones who retreated with cubs returned without them.

'They don't seem to know what to make of us,' Thefona said from the middle of the advancing hunters, feeling a little more secure than when they started, but when the big male suddenly snarled at them, everyone jumped with a start, and stopped in their tracks.

'This is not the time to stop,' Joharran said, forging ahead.

They started out again, their formation a little more ragged at first, but they pulled together again as they continued on. All the lions started moving around, some turning their backs and disappearing into the tall grass, but the big male snarled again, then rumbled the beginning of a roar as he stood his ground. Several of the other big cats were arrayed behind him. Ayla was picking up the scent of fear from the human hunters; she was sure the lions were, too. She was afraid herself, but fear was something that people could overcome.

'I think we'd better get ready,' Jondalar said. 'That male doesn't look happy, and he has reinforcements.'

'Can't you get him from here?' Ayla asked. She heard the series of grunts that was usually a precursor to a lion's roar.

'Probably,' Jondalar said, 'but I'd rather be closer, so I can be more sure of my aim.'

'And I'm not sure how good my aim would be from this distance. We do need to be closer,' Joharran said, continuing to march forward.

The people bunched together and kept going, still shouting, though Ayla thought their sound was more tentative as they drew closer. The cave lions became still and seemed tense as they watched the approach of the strange herd that didn't behave like prey animals.

Then, suddenly, everything happened at once.

The big male lion roared, a staggering, deafening sound, especially from such close range. He started toward them at a run. As he closed in, poised to spring, Jondalar hurled his spear at him.

Ayla had been watching the female on his right. About the time that Jondalar made his cast, the lioness bounded forward running, then vaulted to pounce.

Ayla pulled back and took aim. She felt the back of the spear-thrower with the spear mounted on it rise up almost without her knowing it as she hurled her spear. It was so natural for her, it didn't feel like a deliberate move. She and Jondalar had used the weapon during their entire year-long Journey back to the Zelandonii and she was so skilled, it was second nature.

The lioness soared into her leap, but Ayla's spear met her more than halfway. It found its mark from beneath the big cat, and lodged firmly in her throat in a sudden fatal slash. Blood spurted out as the lioness collapsed to the ground.

The woman quickly grabbed another spear from her holder, and slapped it down on her spear-thrower, looking around to see what else was happening. She saw Joharran's spear fly, and a heartbeat later another spear followed. She noticed that Rushemar was in the stance of one who had just thrown a spear. She saw another large female lion fall. A second spear found the beast before she landed. Another lioness was still coming. Ayla cast a spear, and saw that someone else had, too, just a moment before her.

She reached for another spear, making sure it was seated right – that the point, which was affixed to a short length of tapering shaft made to detach from the main spear shaft, was firmly in place and the hole in the butt of the long spear shaft was engaging the hook at the back of the spear-thrower. Then she looked around again. The huge male was down, but moving, bleeding but not dead. Her female was also bleeding, but not moving.

The lions were disappearing into the grass as fast as they could, at least one leaving a trail of blood. The human hunters were gathering themselves together, looking around and beginning to smile at each other.

'I think we did it,' Palidar said, a huge grin starting.

He had barely got the words out when Wolf's menacing growl caught Ayla's attention. The wolf bounded away from the human hunters with Ayla on his heels. The heavily bleeding male lion was up and coming at them again. With a roar, he sprang toward them. Ayla could almost feel his anger, and she didn't really blame him.

Just as Wolf reached the lion and leaped up to attack, keeping himself between Ayla and the big cat, she flung her spear as hard as she could. Her eye caught another one hurled at the same time. They landed almost simultaneously with an audible *thunk*, and *thunk*. Both the lion and the wolf crumpled in a heap. Ayla gasped when she saw them fall, swathed in blood, afraid that Wolf was hurt.